

The Spiritual Life: Bringing Our Own Oil

Matthew 25:1-13 *“Keep awake therefore,
for you know neither the day nor the hour.”*

The Coming of the Kingdom

This parable is part of a whole section of Jesus’ teachings about the coming of God’s kingdom. He is responding to the disciples’ question “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” There was high expectation that God would act soon in a final way to bring redemption to the world. A messiah was expected who would establish the kingdom of God. It was hoped that Jesus would fulfill this role. After Jesus’ death and resurrection, the early church looked for his quick return in glory and power to reign over a new heaven and a new earth. By Matthew’s time, two generations after Jesus’ death, that hope was dimming. The delay of Christ’s return became a challenge for the Christian community. How do we live in light of this delay? What should be the character of our lives and the attitudes of our spirits if Christ is not going to return, at least in our lifetime?

Does this stuff have any meaning for us today, two thousand years later? Each year the lectionary readings come around to such passages and themes. The end of the age. The coming of God’s kingdom. The triumphant return of Christ. The idea that God will act in some way soon to solve all our problems as persons and as a human family doesn’t make much sense to us. We long for a time when the world might finally get straightened out, when we humans come to our senses and leave behind forever the abominations of war, greed, violence of all kinds, and the injustice that infects our societies and structures. But we have the sense that this is not something God is going to magically bring about. We sense that we are responsible for living in a new way, a different way, and doing what we can to call our brothers and sisters in this life to change, to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God, that is, live in the kingdom of God NOW. If we do our part, live our lives according to what we expect God wants for us and the world, then God will be able to do God’s part.

The Spiritual Life as Waking Up

I think Jesus’ parable, which may seem strange to us at first, can help us. By preserving these teachings of Jesus, Matthew is saying to the church of his day and to us, look, it doesn’t matter when or how everything will finally get worked out. We don’t know these things. However, trust that God’s will and power are always moving in that direction. What matters is that we live not only in hope for the future but right now, in the present, with lives that express God’s reign. We can live in ever-growing and deepening awareness of our relationship to God, to the world as the beloved creation, and to each other as brothers and sisters. Our lives can be characterized by watchfulness, preparation, and awareness. That’s what the parable is about, I think—our living fully in the present, awake and aware, living already the kind of life we hope for, that we believe God wants for us and the world.

Anthony DeMello was a Jesuit priest born in Bombay, India. He taught in a way that combined the Christian message with the spiritual wisdom of his own Buddhist and Hindu culture. He wrote that “spirituality means waking up.” Most of us are asleep, unaware of life in us and around us, lost and immersed in our thinking, in our worry and anxiety, living for tomorrow or hung up in the past. Our spirits are bound in the chains of our attachments to people and things. We are asleep as a society, living the nightmares of greed, violence, consumerism, injustice, and self-gratification. We are asleep, not awake.

The spiritual life is about waking up from our illusions and dreams and embracing reality. It has to do with being fully aware and alive in the present moment, not caught up in the past or the future. It has to do with dropping the attachments that keep us pursuing happiness through things that cannot deliver the very happiness we seek. It has to do with dropping our demands that people be the way we want them to be and accepting them as they are. We become more aware of what is going on inside of us and around us. We stop running from ourselves. We begin to see life, not through the veil of our ideas, our feelings, or our dogmas, but as it is, in all its beauty and ugliness, its goodness and its danger. We learn that seeing only what is wrong leads to cynicism or despair, and that is just as wrong as seeing only what is good or beautiful or right. This is waking up to the whole of reality and, within it all, to God. When we are waking up in this way, we are not only ready to perceive God’s presence and movements in life; we are already living the life of the kingdom of God, the new life Jesus proclaimed, taught, and embodied.

Bringing Our Own Oil

In the parable, the wise bridesmaids go to wait for the bridegroom, taking extra oil for their lamps in case they have to wait a long time. The foolish ones take just their lamps and the oil that is in them, nothing extra. The wait is longer than expected. When the bridegroom finally arrives, the foolish ones panic. Their lamps are going out. They try to borrow oil from the others. The wise ones say no, you can’t have some of ours because there wouldn’t be enough for all of us. Go buy some for yourselves. While the foolish ones are off to the 7-Eleven, the bridegroom arrives, the party begins, and the door is shut. The moment they longed for has come and gone. They missed it because they weren’t prepared. They weren’t ready for it. They were asleep in the way I have been talking about. Unprepared. Not watchful. Not awake and aware.

This unwillingness to share may strike us as a lack of compassion. Not so. It is reality. We can’t borrow our spiritual lives from others. Others can point us in the right direction, say helpful things, and so forth. But the spiritual life, the life of waking up, has to be OURS. No one can really tell us how to do it and no one can do it for us. It is a journey that we each undertake in our own ways, within the realities of our own lives and relationships. We have to bring our own oil. We can’t get it from others.

The Church of the Covenant was born from the vision of offering the kind of Christian community that says to people: “You have your own oil within you. Nobody can give it to you and they don’t have to. You can find it and live it for yourselves. But it takes some effort, some work, and a willingness to make a commitment to your own spiritual life.” Jesus called

people to repent, to change, to wake up in the dawn of God's kingdom. Jesus also taught that the kingdom of God is already within us [Lk. 17:21]. It is not something that we look for outwardly, in the future or here or there. We have it within us. The inward journey is simply how we talk about that life of paying attention and waking up to the reality of ourselves, of God, and of the world. Awareness. Being awake. It takes courage. But it is well worth it. It is better than going through life asleep.

Awake and Prepared

I had a conversation recently with someone about spirituality, about awareness and prayer and so forth. He brought in an example from his experience with rock climbing. A climber on a rock face has to concentrate on everything, on each movement. Also, the climber must carry on a constant inner dialogue in order to be aware of whatever is going on in his or her mind. Doubts. Fears. Overconfidence. Anything that could distract and cause trouble. The mind and body are so concentrated and present that climber experiences moments when everything becomes so vivid and real—the air, the sunlight, the rock itself, themselves as part of it all. It is a moment of complete awareness. This is what religion calls mysticism. Mysticism is not an escape from the world or reality, but a clear and deep insight into and connection with reality, with God, with life around us and our place in it. We have this capacity. It is not something weird or specialized. It is not even the result of heroic spiritual effort. It is as simple as waking up, becoming aware, knowing that our oil is already within us. Being spiritual people has nothing to do with moral perfection or ridding ourselves of “unspiritual” things. It means awareness. The oil is there. All we have to do is be aware of it, practice it, bring it with us as best we can into each day of our lives. Two things come together in this parable—preparation and watchfulness, awareness. Preparation IS becoming aware, watchful. Awareness IS being prepared to truly live and to perceive God's presence and the movements of God's spirit.

My friend's reflections on rock climbing apply to the kind of life that is awake. There are times when we become honest with ourselves, when we finally look at and begin to understand something that has kept us asleep—something we are afraid of, some hurt we are nursing, some feeling of inadequacy or lack of worth, some anger that churns in us. At some point we stop, quiet ourselves, and look at it. Maybe we talk about it for the first time. In that moment, though everything is not resolved, even though the fear or hurt or anger is still there, it has lost its power over us. We feel a rush of wholeness, of new life.

Or maybe we are trying to develop a practice of silence and prayer, and it is so hard because our habit energy keeps us always on the move physically and mentally. But then we sit, for just a few minutes, and we are able to take perhaps only one breath in complete awareness. For that brief time we have been free of our constant thinking, of the worries or preoccupations of our minds. For that one moment, we have tasted the silence that over time can be something we will look forward to. Silence, when thoughts and feelings are noted but not attached to. Our innermost self becomes quiet and ready to listen, to sense God's presence and movement in our lives. This is important for our worship together, also. We have a time of gathering in silence before worship

each Sunday. It is a time for quieting ourselves, settling our thoughts, being aware of our feelings, and becoming still, as the psalm says, so that we can know that God is God. If we do not take this time to prepare ourselves, how can we expect something to happen? How can we expect to know God's presence or hear God's living word to us?

When we are preparing ourselves in this way, when we are becoming more present and aware, then we are ready to be present for and with others. In our Saturday morning children's program at the Festival Center, we meet half an hour before the program begins in order to prepare ourselves, in order to quiet ourselves and be present. It is this preparation and awareness that enables us to be ready to really hear when a child says or does something that opens like a door into their lives. We become ready to receive the gifts that children bring us. If we are not prepared, if we are not aware, then we miss that moment, and the door shuts. We miss the kingdom.

These are moments we prepare for, we are ready for, if we are “keeping awake,” as Jesus tells us. And when we are living our lives in such a way, being as awake as we can be, being as prepared to be open as we can be, then we will be ready when the bridegroom comes. We will be ready for those moments when the illusions of life are peeled back and we see the kingdom all around us and in us. We will be ready and aware to see all around us God and this life Jesus called the kingdom of God.